



# Otedama

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## TOOLS:

- [Chopstick \(1\)](#)
- [Long quilting pin \(1\)](#)
- [Scissors \(1\)](#)
- [Sewing machine \(1\)](#)

*You can, of course, sew your otedama together by hand. If you do, be sure to use very small stitches, so the filling won't leak out.*

- [Sewing needle \(1\)](#)



## PARTS:

- [Thread \(1\)](#)  
*that matches your fabric*
- [Scrap fabric \(1\)](#)  
*Silk is a traditional otedama material, but quilting cottons may be easier to work with. You'll need 1 piece of scrap fabric for each otedama you make.*
- [Filling \(1\)](#)  
*Traditional fillings are adzuki beans or short-grain rice.*
- [Felt scraps \(1\)](#)  
*Optional; for embellishment*
- [Buttons \(1\)](#)  
*Optional; for embellishment*

## SUMMARY

Need to improve your hand-eye coordination? Take up juggling. And make it crafty by whipping up a set of these soft, colorful Japanese juggling toys. All you need are some fabric scraps and a handful of dried beans or rice.

The Japanese word *otedama* refers to a variety of juggling games, played with small handmade toys, which originated in Japan way back in the 9th century. Interestingly, otedama games were historically played only by women and girls, who often juggled together in groups while singing otedama songs.

Otedama reached the height of its popularity after World War II, when other toys were scarce in Japan. Otedama could be easily sewn together from scraps of cloth, and filled with adzuki beans. In fact, parents in wartime Japan sometimes smuggled extra food to their children at school inside the otedama.

Otedama games, and the songs that accompanied them, were passed orally from mothers to daughters for hundreds of years, but today there's little record of the otedama tradition. The term has, however, become a more general name for juggling in modern-day Japan, and is practiced by both men and women.

The earliest otedama toys were essentially tiny drawstring bags, but they evolved into a wonderful variety of shapes — pillows, balls, fish, birds, dolls, and fruits. You can find more modern-looking otedama on many Japanese toy websites today, but we're going to go with tradition, and learn to make a simple "pillow-style" otedama — a design that originated sometime in the 15th century. Then, we'll explore some ways to make variations.

## Step 1 — Making the Basic Otedama



- Fold your scrap fabric in half, right sides together, so you join the two 4" edges.
- Adjust the stitch length on your sewing machine to 2mm. Then sew the 2 layers of fabric together along the 4" edge and one of the ends, using a 1/4" seam allowance.
- I'm using contrasting thread for visibility here; you'll want to use matching thread.
- Clip the corners, and press the seams open with either your fingers or an iron.
- Turn the otedama right side out, poking the corners with a chopstick so they turn out nice and sharp.



## Step 2



- Locate the seam at the bottom of your otedama. This is the seam that's opposite to the open end. Thread a needle, and tie a knot in the thread. Pass the needle into this seam, and bring it back out at the corner of the otedama. (This step will hide your knot.)
- Put the 2 corners together. Take 3–5 tiny stitches through both corners, tacking them together at the point where they meet. On your last stitch, leave a small loop in the thread, pass your needle through it twice, then pull it tight. This makes a secure knot. Now your otedama has a nice, square end.

### Step 3



- To fill your otedama, turn it so that the open end faces up, and set it on a flat surface. Fill with the filling of your choice, until the filling level is about 1 1/2" from the top edge of the fabric.
- Turn under a 1/4" hem around the top edge of the fabric. Press it in place with your fingers, and then secure the 2 sides together with a pin.
- Sew the end of the otedama closed using tiny whipstitches. Knot the end of the thread, as you just did.

### Step 4



- Flatten this seam, and tack the remaining 2 corners together, as you just did. Pat your otedama into shape, and it's finished.



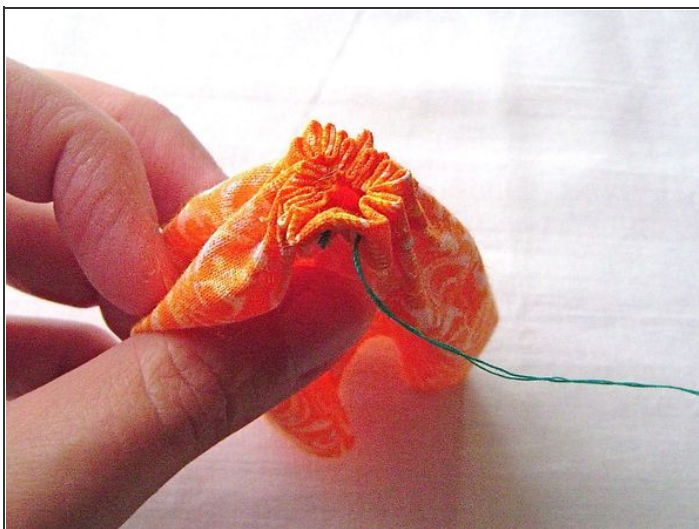
## Step 5 — Variation: Piecework Otedama




- You can create beautiful otedama by adding more fabrics. For a 2-color otedama, start with 2 pieces of fabric, each measuring 4"×3 3/4". Place right sides together, and sew along 3 sides. Then proceed with the basic instructions.
- For a 4-color otedama, start with 4 pieces of fabric, each measuring 4"×2 1/8". Stitch them together in pairs. Place these 2 pieces right sides together, alternating the patterns. Sew together on 3 sides and proceed with the basic instructions.



## Step 6 — Variation: Otedama Fruits



- Traditionally, fruit-shaped otedama were very popular in Japan, as heralds of the changing seasons. 
- Fold your scrap fabric in half, right sides together, so you join the two 4" edges. Adjust the stitch length on your sewing machine to 2mm. Then sew the 2 layers of fabric together along the 4" edge, leaving 2 edges of the otedama unsewn (the top and bottom).
- Next, with the right sides of the fabric together, take one of the open ends of the fabric, and turn a 1/4" hem toward the outside. Press it in place with your fingers. Thread a needle with doubled thread, and tie a large knot in the thread.

**Step 7**

- Make a gathering stitch all the way around the hem. Pull the thread to gather the fabric as tightly as possible. Then take a few stitches across the center opening to seal it up, so your filling won't leak out.
- Turn the otedama right side out. Fill with the filling of your choice, stopping when the filling is 1" from the edge of the fabric.
- Turn a 1/4" hem to the inside of the remaining raw edge of fabric. Then press it in place with your fingers. Thread a needle with doubled thread, and tie a large knot in the thread. Run a gathering stitch through it to gather and close.
- Sew on some felt leaves. You can even embroider some veins on the leaves for an extra touch.



## Step 8 — Variation: Otedama Animals





- Animal otedama are popular in Japan today, and they're a fun way to get kids excited about juggling. To make the owl, dog, and fish, begin with a piece of fabric that's  $4\frac{3}{4} \times 7$ ". Follow the Basic instructions through until you've sewn the end closed and knotted the end of the thread. Then, to make an owl otedama, fold the top seam down in the center. Take a few stitches to hold in place. Add felt and button embellishments.
- To make a fish otedama, run a gathering stitch across the unfilled part, about  $\frac{1}{2}$ " above the top of the filling. Pull the gathering stitch to make a tail. Add felt or fabric fins, and felt or button eyes.
- To make a dog otedama, flatten the top of the otedama so that the 2 corners stick out to the sides. Take a few small stitches through each corner to create ears. Add felt or button embellishments.



## Step 9 — Embellishing Your Otedama



- Since otedama are made for juggling, you'll want to make sure anything you use to embellish yours is attached very securely — an otedama can take a fair amount of abuse through throwing, catching, and dropping. When I make animal otedama, I attach felt cutouts by stitching them down along every edge with a tiny whipstitch. If I add buttons, I sew them on with doubled thread, and make sure they are very secure. 
- You can glue embellishments on as well, but when securely sewn on they seem to stand up better to the rigors of juggling. 

## Step 10 — Learn to Juggle!

- Some good resources for learning to juggle:
  - <http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-jugg...>
  - <http://jugglingdb.com/compendium/startju...>
  - *Otedama: Traditional Japanese Juggling Toys and Games* by Denichiro Onishi (Heian International, 2002)

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